

Talking With Your Tween and Teen about Tough Issues

Handout

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Presented By:
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Teen About Tough Issues

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Teen and Tween
Development

Many will experience:

- Challenges with change
 - (physical, emotional, and intellectual)
- “Growing pain” issues
 - separating their identity from that of their parents
- Moodiness and egocentric view of the world
- Curiosity/experimentation with new behaviors
- Social pressures by peers

Setting the Stage –
Spending Time Together

Get to know your teens:

- Spend time alone with each of your teens
- Show an interest in what your teen is doing
- Make your home a comfortable place
- Look for opportunities to do something special
- Get close to your teen in every day activities
- Eat meals together as a family
- Talk to your teen at bedtime.

Setting the Stage - Rules are Important

- Strive towards consistent rules.
- Be clear about which rules are negotiable and which aren't.
- Involve teen in making and evaluating rules.
- Hold family meetings.
- Explain reasons for rules.
- Be specific and factual.

Guidelines for Rules

- Be very clear about consequences if rule is broken.
- Consider putting agreements in writing.
- Be flexible and open to periodic discussion of rules.
- Choose your battles; use the "Five Year Plan."
- Don't get sucked into teen's on-going battle.

Tips for Parenting an Adolescent

- Demonstrate respect with actions and words.
- Be prepared for dramatic change.
- Be as flexible as you possibly can.
- Respond to challenges - neutral, controlled.
- Be prepared for some degree of rejection.
 - Don't take it personally.
- Limit unsolicited advice to critical issues.
- Lighten up. Use your sense of humor.
- Ask for your teen's opinions. Involve them in some family decisions.

When Faced with a "Difficult Topic"

- Create Time to Talk
- Do Your Research
- Be Factual
- Continue to communicate demonstrating acceptance, respect, humor, and flexibility
- Avoid Confrontations
- Don't mount a personal attack, deliver a sermon, or convene a family conference to open a dialogue on a tough subject

Drugs and Alcohol

- Educate yourself (<http://ncadi.samhsa.gov/>)
- Communicate your values now
- Instead of taking the "big talk" approach, look for opportunities in everyday conversation to develop a dialogue with your kids
- Give the hard facts
- Establish firm limits
- Keep the lines of "communication without condemnation" open.
- Don't just preach it — live it and be a role model

Components of a Good Relationship

- Fun
- Support
- Honesty
- Friendship
- Faithfulness
- Giving space
- Respect for others

Dating and Romantic Relationships

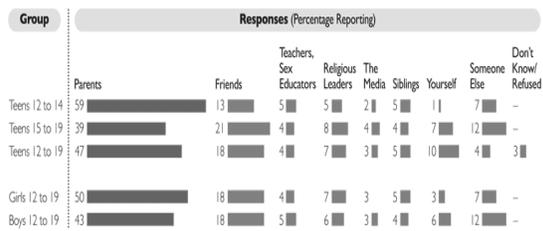
- Keep the lines of communication open
- Discuss responsibilities of being in a relationship
- Discuss consequences of behaviors
- Don't be judgmental or critical
- Teach your child how to say "no"
 - Role play situations

Sex

- Encourage your child to talk and ask questions.
- Maintain a calm and non-critical atmosphere for discussions
- Use words that are understandable/comfortable
- Try to determine your child's level of knowledge and understanding
- Keep your sense of humor and don't be afraid to talk about your own discomfort.
- Relate sex to love, intimacy, caring, and respect for oneself and one's partner.
- Be open in sharing your values and concerns.
- Help your child to consider the pros and cons of choices.

Parents Remain Influential Regarding Teens' Decisions About Sex

When asked, "When it comes to your decisions about sex, who is the most influential?" about half of high schoolers surveyed indicated their parents. Older teens were more likely to be influenced by their friends.



Note: The percentages as reported in "With One Voice 2007" do not total 100 percent.
 Source: Bill Albert, "With One Voice 2007: America's Adults and Teens Sound Off About Teen Pregnancy," The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, February 2007, pp. 7-8, at http://www.theactionandcampaign.org/resources/pdf/pub/WOV2007_fulltext.pdf (September 1, 2008).

Chart 2 • B 2194 • heritage.org

Reasons Adolescents May Not Initiate Conversation

Futris and Seldin, University of Georgia

- Don't know how
- Embarrassment
- Don't want a lecture
- Don't want to be judged
- Afraid of reaction from parent
- Feel they already know everything
- Don't want to be forced into parent's belief
- Afraid parent would wonder why they are asking

Money

- Create an understanding of the cost of things
 - (cars, dinner for 4 at Outback, pair of shoes, etc.)
- Discuss setting goals
- Set up a savings account
- Help them understand cost comparison shopping
- Educate them about credit and credit cards
- Discuss average salaries for specific jobs in geographic areas(www.payscale.com)
- Provide educational opportunities about investing

Allowance

- Written contract
- Weekly allowance suggestion (\$1 for each grade; i.e. 9th grade = \$9/week)
- Allowance must come with responsibilities
- Provide opportunities for extra work for extra allowance
- Have child allot a percentage to savings each week

Money Models

- Parents need to be good “money role models” for:
 - Saving
 - Spending
 - Investing
 - Setting goals

Signs of Trouble

- Depression
- Running away
- Alcohol or drug use
- Poor school performance
- Radical changes in behavior
- Extreme eating or exercise habits
- Friends who are a negative influence
- Uncontrollable temper or aggressive behavior

Thank You

Please take a moment to complete the evaluation form provided. Your input is appreciated.

Is Your Teen in Trouble?

As the parent of a teenager, you may be worried about some of the changes you see in your child. Which behaviors is a normal part of adolescent development? And which behaviors might signal trouble? There *are* ways to spot trouble and ways you can help your troubled teen get back on track.

Signs of trouble

Experts agree that the difference between normal teen behavior and troubling behavior is often a matter of degree. Most teenagers have skipped a class, for example, but there's trouble when a teen is skipping school regularly. Here are some signs of trouble to look for in your teen.

- ***Alcohol or drug use.*** Many teens experiment with alcohol or drugs. And most parents have very strong values about drugs and alcohol. One drink might not lead to trouble for your teen. But it could if he's arrested for underage drinking, if he compromises his safety because his judgment is impaired, or if that drink leads to a pattern of regular or heavy drinking or drug abuse. If you're not sure whether your child has been drinking or using drugs, make a point to observe him when he comes home. Do you smell alcohol or marijuana on his breath or clothes? Are his eyes red? Is his speech slurred? Perhaps he's lacking concentration or coordination. It's a sign of trouble, too, if your teen ever drives while intoxicated or can't account for large amounts of money spent.
- ***Depression.*** It's normal for teens to be sad from time to time. Marked mood swings or a dramatic change in sleep habits, though, may signal depression. Sudden weight loss or gain, not caring about appearance, or unexplained cuts or scratches are other signs to look for. It's also cause for concern if your teen talks about suicide or says things like, "No one would miss me if I were gone."
- ***Extreme eating or exercise habits.*** This is the age when eating disorders begin. Your teen may be in trouble if she's preoccupied with dieting and not eating enough or not eating regularly. Eating too much or too often can also be problematic. Some teens with eating disorders over-exercise. They exercise several hours a day or become irritable if they miss a workout.
- ***Poor school performance.*** Teens in trouble may have a sudden or serious drop in grades. Is your teen skipping class or school? Is he disruptive in class? Talk with the teacher or guidance counselor if you suspect this is a problem. If he's not turning in homework or is showing no interest in school, your child may be facing serious school performance problems.

- ***Friends who are a negative influence.*** Teenagers need close friends. But friends who are a negative influence can lead your child onto the wrong track. Is she missing curfew when she's out with certain friends? Do her friends have a negative attitude about school? It's troubling if your teen's friends are abusing alcohol or drugs, have been involved in dating violence, or have ever run away.
- ***Running away.*** Leaving home without telling anyone is cause for alarm. If your teen has ever run away from home, this is a cry for help and a sign that your teen isn't getting the support he needs.
- ***Sexual behavior that worries you.*** More than half of today's teens are sexually active. Whatever your personal beliefs about sexual behavior, if your child is a sexually active younger teen, is having sex with multiple partners, or is showing symptoms of sexually transmitted disease, you should be worried.
- ***Uncontrollable temper or aggressive behavior.*** Teens in trouble often lose their tempers or use violence to try to solve conflicts. Does your teen punch walls or destroy property when he's angry? Is he getting into fights at school? If he's ever been violent toward you or a girlfriend, your teen is in trouble and needs help.

How do I talk to my teen about my concerns?

The first step in helping your teen handle the problem she's facing is to talk with her about your concerns. This may be difficult, especially if your family has been fighting or has not been communicating well. Even if you're communicating well, your teen may have difficulty talking to you about what's troubling her. It usually gets easier with time and practice. Here are some tips to help you get started.

- ***Set up a time to talk.*** Pick a time when you and your teen can focus on the conversation. Minimize distractions, like the television, phone, or household interruptions. Let your teen know that you want to talk because you're concerned about some of his behavior. Make it clear that this will not be a time to punish. It's a time for you to talk with each other.
- ***Describe what you've noticed.*** Be specific. You might say, "I've noticed that you've lost a lot of weight in the past three months." Be clear about why the behavior troubles you. Avoid comments like, "I told you so" or "How could you?" Instead, use "I" statements, like "I worry when you come home late, because it makes me think you might have been in an accident."
- ***Encourage your teen to talk.*** Ask your teen for her view of the situation. You might ask "How do you feel about the grades you've been getting?" Try putting the focus on teens in general, instead of on your own child. If you are concerned about drugs, you might say, "Do kids at school feel pressure to use drugs?"

- ***Listen to your teen without interrupting.*** It's easy for emotions to get in the way, but plan to stay calm as you listen. Try to see things from your teenager's point of view. He'll be better able to tell you the truth if you show respect for what he has to say. If you cut off the conversation, you won't learn what your teen is thinking and feeling.
- ***Try to agree with your teen on a plan of action.*** Use your conversation to begin solving the problem. What help do you need to address the problem? Would your teen benefit from seeing a counselor or talking to another trusted adult? Together, come up with a plan to involve others who can help you find solutions.

Where to find help

Many parents look outside the family for help in solving teen problems. And many teens find it easier to talk to others about things they wouldn't tell their parents. Figure out together where your teenager can go for advice and support.

- ***Support at school.*** Teachers and guidance counselors routinely deal with school performance issues. They're probably comfortable talking with your teen about other troubling issues as well. Some schools have students trained to give support to peers about social, personal, and academic concerns. Often a respected teacher or friend at school can pave the way for a teen to accept additional help.
- ***Family doctor.*** Your child's pediatrician or the family doctor can address a health problem affecting your teen. A physician can diagnose an eating disorder, treat a sexually transmitted disease, or prescribe medication for depression, if needed. Doctors can also tell you about other supports in your community.
- ***Member of the clergy.*** Clergy members are trained to listen without taking sides. You and your teen might seek this counsel together if you are constantly fighting or if your arguments are often unresolved. Or your teen might go alone for guidance around an issue she's facing.
- ***Friend or relative.*** A trusted adult can give advice about friends, answer questions about sex, or offer alternatives to running away. A friend or relative might also persuade your teen to accept professional help.

Supporting your teenager

You can help your teenager get through this difficult time. Keep talking. Stay involved. Be available.

- ***Get to know your teenager's friends.*** Encourage your teen to invite friends to your home. Offer to drive your teen and his friends to or from an after-school activity. Join in conversations about the movies or television shows they've seen. You will quickly get a sense of the values and morals shared by the friends in your child's life.

- ***Help build your child's self-esteem.*** Whenever you can, offer support and encouragement. Let your teen know that you trust her ability to make responsible choices. You might acknowledge a good choice by saying, "I can see you really thought through that decision carefully." Or recognize improvement with, "You really seem to understand math much more than you did a month ago." Teens with high self-esteem make informed choices and are less likely to be influenced by negative friends.
- ***Encourage decision-making and responsibility in your teen.*** We all learn from mistakes, and your teenager will too. Choose your battles with your teen. Even if he is making a bad choice, let him, as long as his health or safety isn't at risk. Allow your teen to decide, for example, how he will meet his curfew. Encourage him to take on responsibilities outside the home. Perhaps he could get a part-time job or join a sports team. It will be up to your teen to meet the expectations of a new boss, coach, or team.
- ***Set clear limits and consequences for your teen's behavior.*** Your teen still needs you to impose fair, predictable consequences when she breaks the rules. Go over the rules together from time to time, to see which can be changed and which need to be reinforced.
- ***Seek out support for yourself, too.*** One way to help your teen is to make sure you have support for yourself, too. You need others who recognize how difficult this time can be for *you*. A spouse, a friend, or a counselor at your employer's EAP may provide the help you need. Or you might join a support group for parents.

As a parent, you *can* help your teen get through a troubled time. Once you have recognized that there is a problem, you are on your way to helping your teen handle it.

Communication Exercise for Teens

This exercise is designed for you and your parent(s) to better understand how you communicate with each other. Since there are no right or wrong answers, you can answer each question based on how you feel either at the moment or in general. The 'yes' column may be used for "most of the time" or "usually." The 'no' column represents "seldom" or "never." For each question, draw a circle around the word 'yes' or 'no.' You may wish to fill this out for one or both parents, depending on your situation.

| | | |
|---|-----|----|
| Does your parent seem interested in the things you do and are involved with? | Yes | No |
| Are you able to say what you feel in your home? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent wait until you are through talking before "having his/her say"? | Yes | No |
| Does your family talk things over with each other? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent seem to respect your opinion? | Yes | No |
| Do you respect the ideas and opinions of your parent? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent tend to lecture and preach too much to you? | Yes | No |
| Do you discuss personal problems with your parent? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent tend to talk to you as if you were much younger than you are? | Yes | No |
| Do you wish your parent would give you more privacy? | Yes | No |
| Are you able to discuss matters of sex with your parent? | Yes | No |
| Do you feel that your parent trusts you? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent have confidence in your abilities | Yes | No |
| Do you hesitate to disagree with your parent? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent become upset when he/she talks with you about some problem? | Yes | No |
| Do you find yourself "tuning out" your parent instead of talking with him/her? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent consider your opinion in making decisions, which concern you? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent explain his/her reason for not letting you do something? | Yes | No |
| Do you help your parent understand you by telling him/her how you think and feel? | Yes | No |
| Does your parent try to make you feel better when you're "down in the dumps"? | Yes | No |
| Do you wish that you and your parent could communicate better? | Yes | No |

Complete the following statements:

The most difficult subject to discuss with my parent(s) is...

I wish my parent(s) would...

What worries me most is...

What I value most about the relationship that I have with my parent(s) is...

After you have completed this exercise, you and your parent(s) might want to sit down together and discuss your answers. Be sure to choose a time when there won't be any interruptions!

Encourage your parent(s) to ask you questions about your answers. The discussion that you and your parent(s) have about this exercise will probably be very rewarding and set the tone for better communication.

Good luck!

Adapted from: "Parent-Teenager Communication," *Public Affairs Pamphlet No. 438*. New York, New York.

Positive Communication with Your Teen

Phrases that show acceptance

- "I like the way you handled that."
- "I like the way you tackle a problem."
- "I'm glad you enjoy learning."
- "I'm glad you're pleased with...."
- "It looks as if you enjoyed that."
- "How do you feel about it?"

Phrases that show confidence

- "Knowing you as I do, I'm sure you'll give it your best try."
- "You'll make it!"
- "I have confidence in your judgment."
- "It's a rough one, but I'm sure you can figure it out."
- "You met lots of challenges in the past. I have confidence in your ability to meet this tough one."

Phrases that focus on contributions, assets, and appreciation

- "Thanks! That helped a lot."
- "It was thoughtful of you to..."
- "I really appreciate that you..."
- "I could really use your help with..."
- "Would you do ... for the family?"
- "Your contribution really makes/made a difference."

Phrases that recognize effort and improvement

- "It looks as if you really worked hard on that."
- "You really thought through that carefully."
- "Look at the progress you're making."
- "You've really come a long way."

Phrases that show respect

- "I can understand why you'd feel that way."
- "Your opinions show that you've thought this through carefully."
- "I have a different way of looking at it, but I can certainly see why you'd think that way."
- "I hadn't thought of it that way before."
- "That's a very interesting way to look at..."
- "I respect your opinion because I respect you, but I see it differently."
- "I see that it's important for you to feel that way."

Positive Communication with Your Teen

| POSITIVE | NEGATIVE |
|--|--|
| I expect you to talk to me without using four-letter words. | Don't you dare talk to me that way! |
| I'm glad you told me. | How could you have been so stupid? |
| I am upset that you have not considered my needs. | You are incredibly self-centered. |
| I'm glad you have learned from the experience. | I told you so. |
| I am angry that you have not picked up after yourself. | Why can't you do anything around here? |
| You'll need to follow through on this. | You never take responsibility for anything! |
| The state university that you are applying has standards for grades. | You'll never get into college with grades like that! |
| How do you feel about the grade you earned? | With the pitiful effort you put in, I knew you'd get a bad grade. |
| You have some difficult decisions to make. | You're headed for trouble. |
| I appreciate the time you took to clean your room. | It's about time you did something around here. |
| When you leave your things all over the house, I feel frustrated and embarrassed when company comes. | You're such a slob! |
| It sounds as though it is very important to you. | You can't possibly think I'll agree to that. |
| Our relationship is important to me. | All you ever do is fight with me. |
| It's important that you understand how critical this is. | I can't believe that you'll ever be able to get along in this world. |
| There are consequences to the choices you are making | This is the last time I bail you out. |
| It's important to me that you make an effort to be less negative. | I can't stand that negative attitude of yours. |
| Apparently we are finished with this conversation. | You always have to have the last word. |
| Because it's something I feel very strongly about. | Because I said so! |
| It's critical that you call me when you are going to be late. | It was irresponsible and inconsiderate of you not to call me. |
| I expect to be treated with respect. | Don't you talk back to me! |

Online Resources

Medline Plus – Adolescent Development

www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/002003.htm

Tips for Parenting Tweens

www.tweenparenting.about.com

Parenting Tips and Articles on Parenting Teens

www.byparents-forparents.com/index.html

Talking with Kids about Tough Issues

www.talkingwithkids.org

The National Parent Information Network

www.npin.org

The National Association for Self Esteem

www.self-esteem-nase.org/reference.shtml

Teens and the Internet

www.netsmartz.org

Hotlines:

National Youth Crisis Hotline - (800) HIT-HOME, (800) 448-4663

Montgomery County Crisis Center - (240)777-4000

Books

“Parenting Teens With Love & Logic: Preparing Adolescents for Responsible Adulthood”, by Foster W. Cline

“Helicopters, Drill Sergeants, and Consultants: Parenting Styles and the Messages They Send”, by Jim Fay

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Eliane earned her graduate degree in Organizational Counseling and Post Masters in Clinical Counseling from Johns Hopkins University. She is a Licensed Clinical Professional Counselor providing clients with solution-focused counseling through Employee Assistance Programs and in private practice.

Eliane is also a trainer with LifeWork Strategies and at the Commission for Women Counseling and Career Center. She has conducted more than 100 workshops in the past 4 years on a range of topics, including Assertive Communication, Listening Skills, Team Skills, Goal Setting Techniques, Time Management, and Setting Boundaries.

Eliane has a diverse cultural background and speaks multiple languages, including English, German, Portuguese and Spanish. She is a mother and a resident of Montgomery County.